



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

Robin Gill, *Theology Shaped by Society*, vol. 2: Sociological Theology

Citation for published version:

Grumett, D 2013, 'Robin Gill, *Theology Shaped by Society*, vol. 2: Sociological Theology', *Expository Times*, vol. 124, no. 12, pp. 608. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0014524613494546d>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1177/0014524613494546d](https://doi.org/10.1177/0014524613494546d)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Expository Times

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



STRUCTURE, MISSION AND MUSIC

Robin Gill, *Theology Shaped by Society*, vol. 2: *Sociological Theology* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012). £19.99. pp. 219. ISBN: 978-1-4094-2597-7).

In this second volume of his 2012–13 trilogy, Robin Gill reworks material from *Theology and Social Structure* (Mowbrays 1977) and *Competing Convictions* (SCM 1989). There follows an assessment of churchgoing in York that significantly updates *The 'Empty' Church Revisited* (Ashgate 2003), and two studies of church music, the first originating in *Churchgoing and Christian Ethics* (CUP 1999).

In his opening chapter, Gill argues that the later twentieth century sociology of knowledge demands theologians' attention, in order that they might better understand how their own discourse is socially bounded and vulnerable to corruption through power. Yet such understanding may just as easily arise within theology itself, such as in the apophatic unknowing that impelled medieval mystics. Only a theologian estranged from his own tradition needs interdisciplinary tuition on this particular point. The two case studies that Gill next introduces concern just war and abortion. Regarding the first, he captures well the tension with historic Christian pacifism, even if just war theory developed as a pragmatic attempt to limit war and its severity rather than to excuse or promote them. Turning to abortion, Gill generally recognises the widely varying national contexts for theological-ethical debate, although comparisons seem strained between an increasingly secularised Britain and the United States, where conservative Christianity can swing elections. Gill ends this part by calling, with good reason, for a shift away from a view of life as 'ordered' to one of life as 'God-given' (*adeodata*), citing the potentially sinister use of gift-giving as a means of securing status and exercising control. Yet he also seeks, accepting implicitly the justly-critiqued thesis of Anders Nygren, to defend *agápē* against *érōs* as the better model for Christian love. In a postmodern era, however, might the desire of *érōs* not supply a more disruptive, relational impulse to Christian identity than its undifferentiated, thinly-spread and more easily bureaucratized alternative?

Proceeding to empirical studies, Gill shows how, in York, mission was not invented in the late twentieth century, being equally a feature of 1840s parish life. Excluding Roman Catholics, the numerical decline of adults (although not of Sunday Schools) began in the 1850s and has continued ever since. Taking this long view, the main outcome of growth initiatives has been an ongoing ebb and flow as some congregations have increased and others reduced. For practitioners, chapter 7, on how the hymnody shapes the theology of people in the pews, is probably the most engaging. Widely available is a theology of spiritual agency by an autonomous human subject. Gill notes of *Complete Mission Praise*: 'Perhaps not surprisingly 72 of its hymns start with "I".' (p. 178)

Being largely a compilation of reedited material the volume has less coherence than a new work, and despite updating its underlying research base feels somewhat dated. Nevertheless, for those interested how Christianity has been studied in Britain over recent decades, Gill offers a good selection of approaches.

DAVID GRUMETT

School of Divinity, University of Edinburgh